



From the cover of "[Piaget for Beginners](#)"

## Lev Vygotsky on [Jean Piaget](#)

Jean Piaget was born in 1896, three months before Lev Vygotsky. But Piaget outlived Vygotsky by 46 years. Vygotsky died in 1934, Piaget in 1980. Piaget spent most of his life in Geneva, Switzerland, and in nearby Neuchâtel, where he was born.

Piaget was an NGO man. He was Director of a Swiss NGO called [International Bureau of Education](#) (IBE) for 40 years, from 1929 to 1969 (i.e. from age 35 to age 75), after which the IBE was incorporated into the Paris-based United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The IBE remained, and still remains, in Geneva.

Piaget received a doctorate in 1918, in Natural History (of molluscs), although he was later known as a Psychologist. In 1921, at the age of 25, Piaget was made the director of a small private NGO called the [Rousseau Institute](#), in Geneva. The Rousseau Institute had been started by [Édouard Claparède](#) in 1912 “to turn educational theory into a science”. Claparède had in turn been the protégé of [Théodore Flournoy](#), a spiritist.



Jean Piaget as a promising young man

The same Claparède was soon the founder of a much more ambitious NGO, with “International” in its title, helped by a grant of \$5000 from the US Rockefeller Foundation, in 1925. This was the IBE. From 1915 Claparède was Professor of Psychology at the University of Geneva in succession to Flournoy, and he held this position until his death in 1940. In 1929, Claparède promoted Piaget from the Rousseau Institute to the “International” NGO. In the same year of 1929, Piaget joined Claparède’s University of Geneva as Professor of Child Psychology.

The most prominent supporter of the IBE at its founding was

[Albert Thomas](#), who had become the Director-General of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) at its founding, in Geneva, in 1919, remaining in that position until his death in 1932. The ILO, though ostensibly concerned with labour, was and still is constructed as a “class neutral” or possibly “class balanced” organisation, with employers in it as well as workers.



Dr Jean Piaget, Director

UNESCO's [brief historical note on the IBE](#) states:

*“Since 1934, the IBE has organized the International Conference on Public Education (now the International Conference on Education) which, from 1946 onwards, was convened together with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), founded in 1945.*

*“In 1969, the IBE became an integral part of UNESCO while retaining intellectual and functional autonomy.*

*“In 1999 the IBE became the UNESCO institute responsible for educational contents, methods and teaching/learning strategies through curriculum development.”*

At the moment in 1929 when Jean Piaget was made Director of the IBE, Thomas was still Director-General of the ILO, and Claparède was Professor of Psychology at the University of Geneva. By 1934, the promoters of the IBE had leveraged its initial origin as the private NGO project of Professor Claparède, into a *de facto* world authority, with state-level participation, led by an intellectual (Piaget) who had no equal, and hardly any critics apart from Vygotsky, from then until his death in 1980 and even up to now, 36 years later.

The Assistant Director of the IBE for the 40-year term of Piaget as Director, was Pedro Rosselló. Between 1934 and 1968 the IBE issued 65 “recommendations”. According to Pedro Rosselló’s historical note ([downloadable here](#)),

*“It is difficult to form an opinion on the weight which these 65 recommendations may have had, their implementation having been left entirely to the governments’ discretion.”*

This statement is intended to deceive, but instead, it reveals. This was a small lobby group with unrivalled access to international networks, and no opposition. Far from having vague misgivings about the effectiveness of its propaganda, it worked with relentless determination to create a hegemony

for itself, for the pseudo-science that it pushed, and for the class that it represented. Without doubt, it succeeded. This was an NGO success story that modern NGOs (like, in South Africa, [Equal Education](#) and [Section 27](#)) can only envy. Doors were opened for them, and they swept through.



**Jean Piaget, Master of the Universe, 1937**

Piaget's life's work was to create an *ad hoc*, utilitarian framework upon which could be overlaid a set of arbitrary assertions, leading towards a non-political (i.e. bourgeois) system of syllabus and curriculum design that would be applied all over the globe. As the Director of the IBE, posing as an international authority, he promoted his gospel relentlessly. Piaget's influence did not arrive by the luminosity of his science, which was practically non-existent, or by the intellectual recognition of his critical peers, who, with the exception of Vygotsky, remained dumb. Piaget's influence came by means of bureaucratic manoeuvres and institutional pre-emptions. Piaget worked himself into the position of being the "default" theorist, as he remains, to a large extent, today.

The critique of Piaget is this: His volumes of literature on education were produced *ex novo* and without much reference to other branches of scientific human culture. In this respect Piaget was little different from his fellow-psychologists of the period. In the matter in which we are interested for the purposes of this course, and to which we will return, which is the periodisation of childhood development, Piaget's work hardly rises to the level of the empirical (his attempt at empiricism rests on samples which are too small, and too local) and not at all to the philosophical, or scientific.

For the “other side” to the above-described critical view, i.e. for a more appreciative take on Jean Piaget, please see the Cambridge Companion to Piaget (432 pages, 3MB PDF) downloadable from [here](#) or [here](#).

### **Vygotsky on Piaget**

Lev Vygotsky, in the attached document, begins politely, but by his third paragraph he is beginning to thoroughly demolish Piaget. There is little or no science in Piaget, according to Vygotsky. Following on from Freud and others, Piaget treated psychology as if he had a blank sheet upon which to write anything he liked. This was not science. Says Vygotsky:

*“Piaget tries to escape [from “fatal duality” between theory and data] by sticking to facts. He deliberately avoids generalizing even in his own field and is especially careful not to step over into the related realms of logic, of the theory of cognition, or of the*

*history of philosophy. Pure empiricism seems to him the only safe ground.*

*“The new facts and the new method led to many problems... Problems gave birth to theories, in spite of Piaget’s determination to avoid them by closely following the experimental facts and disregarding for the time being that the choice itself of experiments is determined by hypotheses. But facts are always examined in the light of some theory and therefore cannot be disentangled from philosophy. This is especially true of facts relative to thinking. To find the key to Piaget’s rich store of data we must first explore the philosophy behind his search for facts – and behind their interpretation, which he presents only at the end of his second book [Judgment and Reason in the Child] in a resumé of its contents.”*

Piaget furtively conceals his theoretical framework, says Vygotsky, until his summary. Vygotsky says that Piaget makes an arbitrary choice so as to base his psychology on the “pleasure principle”, associated with the equally arbitrary, *ad hoc*, and non-scientific psychologist, Sigmund Freud.

Communists say that from its earliest moment, the child’s consciousness is social, and that it continues to develop in a social way. Piaget makes an arbitrary presumption that this is not so. Vygotsky notes that in Piaget’s work (“autism” here means self-centredness):

*“...autism is seen as the original, earliest form of thought; logic appears relatively late; and egocentric thought is the genetic link between them.*

*“This conception, though never presented by Piaget in a coherent, systematic fashion, is the cornerstone of his whole theoretical edifice.”*

Piaget smuggles in the presumption that the child is fundamentally self-centred, and not social, and then he makes this assumption the foundation of all his work. Vygotsky quotes one of Piaget’s arbitrary pronouncements, thus:

*“The social instinct in well-defined form develops late. The first critical period in this respect occurs toward the age of 7 or 8 [Judgment and Reason in the Child, p. 276]”*

In Vygotsky’s part II, where Piaget’s experiments are compared to his own, Vygotsky writes:

*The development of thought is, to Piaget, a story of the gradual socialization of deeply intimate, personal, autistic mental states. Even social speech is represented as following, not preceding, egocentric speech.*

*The hypothesis we propose reverses this course... The primary function of speech, in both children and adults, is communication, social contact. The earliest speech of the child is therefore essentially social.*



In his part III, Vygotsky again probes Piaget's evasiveness. He writes:

*"...many issues in the complex field of child thinking border on the theory of cognition, on theoretical logic, and on other branches of philosophy. Time and again Piaget inadvertently touches upon one or another of these but with remarkable consistency checks himself and breaks off. Yet in spite of his express intention to avoid theorizing, he does not succeed in keeping his work within the bounds of pure factual science. Deliberate avoidance of philosophy is itself a philosophy, and one that may involve its proponents in many inconsistencies. An example of this is Piaget's view of the place of causal explanation in science.*

*"Piaget attempts to refrain from considering causes in presenting his findings... Piaget's whole approach [is] a matter of purely arbitrary choice."*

Piaget's apparent refusal of theory is a way of advancing an actual, but unsupported, theory of self-centredness, one that is consistent with bourgeois "common sense". This theory is made to appear as if it is supported by empirical observation, but Piaget's observations are of an absurdly limited sample of children, as is demonstrated in Vygotsky's concluding paragraphs.

The inertia around educational theory, and the retention of

the shallow NGO lobbyist Piaget as its “default” theorist for nearly a century, in spite of his clearly evident deficiencies, is a sign of a lack of self-confidence in the ranks of the millions of educators around the world, and a sign of their being trapped under a still larger hegemony, namely that of capitalism in the age of Imperialism.

This is a situation that is ripe for revolution.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Piaget’s Theory of Child Language and Thought, Vygotsky, 1932.](#)
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here.](#)